



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on *Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe*. I would also like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy

recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF works to monitor and promote religious freedom in a diverse array of countries and contexts. This diversity calls for a variety of tools and approaches, as different contexts present different landscapes for the success and failure of religious freedom efforts. For today's hearing, we will be focusing on government policies and societal biases that adversely impact Muslims' religious freedom and related rights in European states, and how the U.S. government should address these issues.

In March 2021, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, informed the Human Rights Council that institutional suspicion of Muslims has reached “epidemic proportions.” Depending on the context, anti-Muslim bias, “targets individuals on numerous grounds, including religion or belief, race, nationality, gender, migratory status, and ethnic origin, resulting in the intersection and confluence of discrimination based on religion or belief and other grounds”. In Europe, surveys show four in 10 citizens hold unfavorable views towards Muslims, and acts of discrimination and violence

targeting Muslim communities in the region are on the rise. This bias manifests through laws, discrimination in public institutions, prejudice through the immigration process, online harassment, and violent attacks, which peaked in 2017 across 29 member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and disproportionately impacted Muslim women.

Some governments across Europe have also adopted legislation that discriminates against Muslims. Claims of countering extremism have been used to justify the closure of mosques in France and Austria, and to ban the construction of new minarets in Switzerland. Attacks on and the desecration of Muslim properties, including mosques, community centers, homes, and businesses have been reported in Norway, France, Greece, Latvia, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Denmark, children born into immigrant, often Muslim, neighborhoods—labeled “ghettos” by the Danish government—must be separated 25 hours each week from their families to learn “Danish values.” The governments of France and Austria have identified “Islamist separatism” and “political Islam” as national security concerns, without clearly defining those terms or requiring a connection to the use or advocacy of violence.

The OSCE defines hate crimes as criminal acts motivated by bias or prejudice towards particular groups. Hate crimes take the form of individual threats, attacks on property, attacks causing physical injury, and in the most grievous cases, murder. The OSCE notes that in some countries, anti-Muslim hate crimes have become an “everyday occurrence.” Public intolerance “against Muslims has increased the fears of Muslim communities” and, as a result, mosques and Muslim community centers are “increasingly likely to securitize” against threats from far right and nationalistic groups. Intolerance against Muslims has negative implications for their freedom of religion or belief, and it is the responsibility of governments to protect their Muslim communities’ human rights and dignity.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Turkel to discuss some of the key issues that intersect with anti-Muslim policies in Europe.